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ABSTRACT

This document notes that the literature addressing children's nuclear fears suggests that children are introduced to the nuclear threat by ways that do not provide dialogue and without regard to the age appropriate needs of the child, and that parents seem to be protecting their children from the horror of a holocaust by not talking about the threat, thereby creating a communication barrier between the generations. It presents material designed to encourage parents to discuss nuclear issues with their children. Ten myths about children's nuclear fears are listed. These myths include the following: (1) a child's fear of nuclear war is not normal; (2) children feel free to talk about what is bothering them; (3) children believe that nuclear war is preventable; (4) children know what their parents think about nuclear war; (5) children are aware that many people are working to prevent nuclear war; (6) American children are better informed than children in the Soviet Union; (7) children get most of their information from the schools; (8) children who worry about nuclear war must be worriers about everything; (9) children are too young to be so worried and afraid of nuclear war; and (10) nuclear fears are best handled by experts. The importance of the process of parents encouraging children to express their concerns and ventilate their fears is described. It is concluded that reducing children's fears is not a political issue, but rather a parental one which does not entail the necessity for a belief in either nuclear disarmament or proliferation. (Author/ABL)

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The Nuclear War Age Barrier Within the Nuclear Family

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The Nuclear War Age Barrier Within the Nuclear Family

Abstract

The literature addressing children's nuclear fears suggests that children are introduced to the nuclear threat by ways that do not provide dialogue and without regard to the age appropriate needs of the child. Parents seem to be protecting their children from the horror of a holocaust by not talking about the threat, thereby creating a communication s barrier between the generations. This presentation offers a parental manual designed to encourage parents to discuss nuclear issues with their children. Dialogue with children about nuclear war may represent a unique meeting ground for the sharply delineated attitudinal contents of militarism and peacism. The manual provides the process necessary to reduce children's fears without regard to political position.

The parental role seems traditionally to be defined as caring for and protecting one's offspring. This appears legitimate as members of the adult populate seek to ensure the survival of their young. There comes a point, however, at which the parental protective umbrella is no longer protective but is an actual detriment to the child's well being (McConnell et al., 1986, American Psychologist).

This phenomenon is no more clearly manifested than with the issue of nuclear war. The topic is avoided in family discussion as parents attempt to protect their children from the truth about the horrors of nuclear annihilation. The issue does not, however, remain outside the consciousness of both groups. Children are very much aware of the nuclear threat, whether or not the topic is ever discussed with parents. Each side seems equally distraught over how to deal with the issue; typically, it is simply ignored. Zeitlin (1984, The Family Therapy Networker), and others in interviewing families found that not only did parents avoid the nuclear issue, but their children seemed to learn that it was a forbidden topic and avoided it as well. "In almost all the families interviewed so far, children seemed to be protecting their parents from their own vulnerability and anguish by not mentioning their fears" (Zeitlin, 1984). So, the protective umbrella seems to work both ways, with parents and children avoiding the issue, attempting to protect each other from the terrible truth each side already knows. (See appendix for an example of the nuclear war age barrier within the nuclear family).

The following parental manual is designed to encourage parents to discuss nuclear issues with their children. The manual offers the opportunity for parents to consider nuclear issues and explore their own feelings and thoughts. The manual presents the various denying strategies of discounting (nuclear war won't happen), invalidating (children shouldn't think about nuclear war; you're too young to worry), and stating that such fears are not normal (worrying about something that's not real; imagination running wild) (Duncan, Kraus & Parks, 1986, Youth and Society).

10 MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN'S NUCLEAR FEARS:
A Guide for Parents

1. A child's fear of nuclear war is not normal.

   A child's fear of potential disaster is as normal and natural as an adult's fear of the same event.

2. Children feel free to talk about what's bothering them.

   Children report the opposite. They say they are afraid to talk about their concerns.

3. Children believe that nuclear war is preventable.

   Children report that they fear nuclear war will occur in their lifetime.

4. Children know what their parents think about nuclear war.

   Many report that they have never heard their parents' views concerning nuclear war.

5. Children are aware that many people are working to prevent such a war.

   Children report believing that adults are uninterested in the prospects and/or prevention of war.

6. American children are better informed than children in the Soviet Union.

The reverse is true: not only are Soviet children better informed, they are also much more optimistic about the future than their American counterparts.

7. Children get most of their information from the schools.

Children have received most of their information from the media, particularly TV. This method of introduction does not allow the children to ask questions, have fears addressed, or correct any misunderstandings about nuclear war.

8. Children who worry about nuclear war must be worriers and worry about everything.

Children who worry about nuclear war do not worry about everything. In fact, they worry the same amount as their peers about other issues.

9. Children are too young to be so worried and afraid of nuclear war.

Children do feel fear. Talking with children and helping them to find ways to reduce their fears usually keeps the fear from harming the child.

10. These kinds of fears are best handled by experts.

The best expert a child can have is the parent who is supportive and comforting when the child is afraid.

Process vs. Position

The literature addressing children's nuclear fears suggests that children are being introduced to the nuclear threat by way of methods that do not provide an opportunity for the sender-to-receiver feedback loop to be completed; i.e., communication concerning the nuclear issue by the media is one-way. Consequently, because the threat is acknowledged by the adult world, without regard to appropriate follow through or the age appropriate cognitive and emotional needs of children, the risk is high that fears will develop as children attempt to understand the threat. Making matters worse is the parental response to the fears which usually typifies their own denial of the nuclear threat and a concern for protecting their children from the horrors of a holocaust. The parental protective attempts often include denying strategies which discount and invalidate the children's concerns into fears.

The literature about children's nuclear fears is almost unanimous in the suggestion for parents to encourage children to express their concerns and ventilate their fears. It is interesting to note that it is the process, characterized by parents encouraging expression and validating the fears in the supportive umbrella of the parent-child relationship, that is of importance to the reduction of children's fears and not the content of what the parents say or their political position. Children's nuclear fears may represent a unique meeting ground for the sharply delineated attitudinal contexts of militarism and peacism; children's fears offer a situation in which the solution

does not depend on one's position about the nuclear issue, but rather on one's parental love and involvement.

In essence, then, reducing children's nuclear fears is not a political issue, but rather a parental one which does not entail the necessity for a belief in nuclear disarmament or proliferation. The guidelines set forth in this presentation not only enable the discussion of the nuclear threat with children, but also allow for the sharing of parental values concerning the nuclear issue itself.

APPENDIX
Dialogue Example of
The Nuclear War Age Barrier
Within The Nuclear Family

Today, I worked with a colleague and two students on this program proposal for SPSSI for the upcoming APA Convention. For a morning, we explored the nuclear war age barrier within the nuclear family. The research suggested most parents were "closed" to nuclear war talk with their children. They simply didn't want to talk about it with them. The research also showed that talk and active involvement were exactly what children were open to and needed.

As is the custom in our family at the end of the day, we catch each other up with the day's review. I sometimes take the lead in sharing what I did. Hopefully, my report from the field will facilitate a reply from my seven year old daughter to the perennial question kids hate to hear: What did you do today?

Father (myself): "I met with some buddies today to put a program together for the next convention in New York."

Daughter (mine -- seven years old): "Hope we can see the giant pandas again."

Father: "The pandas are in Washington where we met last time. This time it's in New York where there are lots of plays and musicals."

Daughter: "I want to see Cats and Starlight Express! What's your program about?"

Father: (pause) "Children."

Daughter: "What about children?"

Father: (long pause) "Oh, just children like you and your buddies Gillian, Joshua, Heather, and Coleen."

Daughter: "Yeah, but what about us?"

Father: (very long pause) "Ok, it's your turn. What did you do in gymnastics today?"

The psychologist keeps running smack dab into the father. The psychologist's world keeps being shut down by the father. The psychologist knows the importance of dialogue with children about nuclear war. The psychologist has presented and published papers in this area, as well as organized a consciousness raising group of graduate students. During the pauses in the dialogue with his daughter, the psychologist keeps poking at himself to broach this area: "Say it! Just go ahead and say it! Come on! The program is about children and, and nuclear war." The "children" comes out but the "nuclear war" stays silent and inside.

The father has stuffed it. Stuffed it in himself outside of this daughter. From the outside world, he has brought nuclear war within two feet of his daughter but can go no closer. He censors himself and keeps it to himself, outside of herself. His instinct is to shield and protect her from harm. Always the cardinal rule: Never harm! The father is apprehensive his news would harm his daughter's seven year old world.

The psychologist is scared of his silence -- it's harmful not to talk. The father is scared of his talk -- silence is golden.